

Biblical Separation -5

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We have been looking at the topic of Biblical separation for the past four weeks. We have seen the reason for separation, the extremes of separation, and the blessing of separation. We have looked into the Bible and seen the various areas in which God calls for separation. We looked at separation from sin, separation from the world, separation from unbelievers and then separation from false doctrine. Each time we have seen what it does not mean, what it does mean, and what we are to then cleave to in place of our separation. We cannot merely separate, we must also cleave to something else.

That brings us to our final area of separation, and that is separation from unrepentant believers. It might sound strange that there should be any thought of separation from fellow Christians, but in fact, in certain circumstances, that is exactly what God calls for. Paul wrote:

I Cor 5:9-11: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler-- not even to eat with such a one."

Notice that Paul does not command separation from the sexually immoral, or greedy, or swindlers, or idolaters of the world because then, Paul reasons, you might as well leave the world itself there are so many of them. Rather, he says, this kind of separation is to be exercised upon those who bear the name or title of brother, i.e. Christian, and who are found unrepentantly, consistently guilty of such things. We find this call in three places: Matthew 18:1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Thessalonians 3. Matthew 18 is what you might call the procedure. 1 Corinthians 5 and 2, as well as Thessalonians 3 are what you might call the case-studies.

"If your brother sins against you go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.(Mat 18:15-18)

There we see the circumstances for this kind of separation – sin. The Bible does not say what kind of sin. In fact the type of sin does not seem to be the point. In 1 Corinthians it was a gross sin of immorality. In 2 Thessalonians it was a sin of laziness. The point seems to be not the type of sin, but the attitude toward the sin – unrepentance. If there is a hardness of heart, a defence of sin, and a refusal to accept correction, separation from such a believer will be the result. Christians that are

known to be caught in a pattern of sin which is clearly harming them, hindering their growth, and bringing reproach upon the name of Christ and the Body of Christ are to be approached in this way to restore them to a life of holiness. If these steps are refused, then separation from such a professing believer will be the result.

Notice the procedure Jesus enacts. Firstly, there is to be a meeting in privacy. Here, a believer meets with another to try and restore them. Galatians 6:1 gives us the kind of heart, humility and approach we ought to have for this meeting:

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” (Gal 6:1)

A spirit of gentleness is to pervade this meeting. There is to be a spirit of humility, knowing that you too could fall into any sin. This meeting must seek answers before it gives them. It seeks to find out if this person is truly sinning, knowingly and unrepentantly. Only if this is established, should there be loving rebuke and reproof.

Now if such a person repents – the goal has been reached. I recall a church where even after repentance, a kind of punitive period of shame was instituted, founded upon the reasoning, “the church must know that sin has consequences”. This is completely unbiblical and finds no basis in Scripture. If there is repentance, then there is immediate restoration, at any point in this chain.

But if that person shows hardness of heart, then we must escalate our attempts to restore them. Notice - escalate our attempts to restore them, not escalate the speed, so as to reach the final stage of church discipline. Our goal is for a person’s purity, not for an ideal of purity. I have seen the failure to make this distinction result in a cold, brutal form of church discipline. Jesus says that the next stage is a meeting in plurality. Here we take a witness with us to establish if the person is truly in unrepentance. Again, the goal is not to indict them as unrepentant; the goal is, by the grace of God see them repent. The other person comes along not to be added muscle, but in the case of further steps being taken, there can be an honest witness who can testify that the person doing the confronting is not twisting the story out of some personal grudge. Paul told Timothy the kind of heart and spirit which will restore people:

“And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.” (2Ti 2:24-26)

Let me add something here. We do not have to rush off from the meeting in plurality to the next step if there is no immediate repentance. Christ was instituting a principle here, not a factory conveyor belt process. Would there be anything unscriptural about having more than one meeting in plurality with the sinning believer? Does God not repeat his calls for us to repent? In love, would it not be right for a number of meetings like this calling this person to repent? Sometimes the speed with which we go from one meeting to the other belies the fact that restoration, not punishment was truly the goal in our hard hearts.

But, if the believer caught in sin has not responded to numerous calls for his repentance, then he is to be met with a meeting in public. The whole church is to be told about this person's unrepentant behaviour. This is a further call for his repentance. Whether this is a call for repentance at a public gathering, or whether it simply means the entire church is to be told and begin calling in this person to repent, either way it is clear: his unrepentant behaviour is to be made known to the local church at large, for a final stage of calling for repentance. The same spirit of meekness, love and gentleness is used throughout.

But, if all this is rejected, and the believer excuses, denies or shamelessly boasts in his sin, then the act of separation is to occur. Jesus said, speaking to a Jewish audience, 'let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector'. Now, to a Jew, tax collectors and Gentiles were not people you had fellowship with. You had to deal with them on different occasions, but you did not invite them into your home, you did not share times of laughter and enjoyment with them. They were, rightly or wrongly, perceived by the Jewish mind to be unclean. So, what Jesus is then calling for is a separation from such a believer. They are to be put out of the local church, denied its fellowship. The believers are to cut off from formerly joyous and warm fellowship. There is not to be the same times of open sharing. Let me say, this is emphatically not a general cold shoulder. It is a very deliberate, personally painful and reluctant withdrawal of the privileges of Christian fellowship in one last hope that the person will repent.

Let's look at the two case studies to gain an idea of what this looks like. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul writes:

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."

Notice, Paul's description of the final stage of church discipline is very clear: remove this one from among you. Deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. That rather difficult phrase probably means – exclude the man from God's hedge of protection against sin and the world which is the church. When someone is formally excluded from the church by a godly church, God can use Satan to discipline the man to a point of true repentance. In the verse we read in Matthew, Jesus said:

"Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

God's discipline is what is worked out when Spirit-controlled believers agree on church discipline. But the idea is very clear – if a believer is disciplined in that way, he is put out the church, and is put in a place where spiritually, he is outside of God's protective umbrella, so as to cause repentance.

To many this sounds so harsh, but listen to Paul's words in 5:12-13:

"For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

That is a definitive answer to the phrase you hear a lot today: "We mustn't judge". Instead, you have Paul clearly saying we are to judge other believers. God will judge unbelievers, so we are to concern ourselves with the unrepentant sin of a professing believer and then judge them guilty of unrepentance. An unrepentant heart is not something fitting for a believer, so church discipline essentially says: "Until you act like a believer again, we cannot include you in our fellowship. You will be to us like an unbeliever, for they are unrepentant of their sins." There is a withholding of close fellowship. He is put out the church and denied the privileges he enjoyed as a member.

As an aside, does that not tell you what kind of fellowship and love we are to enjoy as obedient believers? If there is to be a sharp contrast in warm fellowship before and after church discipline, it necessitates that fellowship be warm, intimate and real as a norm. If believers hardly show more interest and love for each other than the unsaved do, you can expect the intended effect of church discipline to malfunction. Moreover, if believers are generally fellowshiping with the unsaved in an intimate way, again – separation of this nature will not have its intended effect. Separation from sinning believers only makes sense when cleaving to one another is a cherished, treasured thing.

We see the other example of this in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15:

"Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. (2Th 3:6-15)

The situation here was that certain of the Thessalonians had stopped working for a living. They thought the return of the Lord was so imminent as to mean they could sell what they had and mooch around. There were some permanent loafers, which Paul rebuked. He said the other Thessalonian Christians were to keep away from them and have nothing to do with them

What was the intended result? That they may be ashamed. The idea here is not to please ourselves, and shut the doors on those we dislike. The idea is to withdraw privileges so as to cause profound regret and shame. The believer ought to feel that they are out in the cold. It is not that the other believers are to be mean-spirited and

ugly. It is that the sinning believer will sense an immediate loss of intimacy, closeness and participation in the joy of the local church.

Notice Paul's very important requirement: do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. He knew the sinful tendency is to start to see this sinning believer as an enemy, someone to shun or wage war on. He says that is not to be the case. There is to be a warning. There is still to be enough contact so as to warn them of their sin, and the dangerous consequences thereof.

What this amounts to is that when a good, Biblical church agrees to discipline someone, the believers in that church should not deflate or dilute the power of that discipline by fellowshipping with that sinning believer as if nothing had happened. You do them no good in that case. You only postpone the harm that is coming their way through their sin. Real love will change focus. We will turn down invitations to just hang out and have fun. Instead our phone calls or visits will be all centred on pleading with them to turn from their sin. Their unrepentance will become the main point of conversation when we see them. We will not speak about pointless niceties just because we pity them. If we do pity them, we will warn them as a brother, or as a sister.

Now, a lot of people begin to squirm in their chairs when we speak about separation from other believers. It all sounds too much like being cruel or cold-hearted, somewhat contrary to the law of love. But this is the simple-minded, one-dimensional view of love that does no one any good and does not satisfy anyone's heart. We could compare it to the kind of love that never reprimands, warns or disciplines a child, because we think that being negative is not loving. But everyone understands that this supposedly, superficially positive attitude is in fact harmful to the child. In fact, its only positive aspect is for the parent who selfishly dislikes the labour of correction and discipline. But in the long run, it is negative for everyone. The same is true in separation from unrepentant believers. It will only seem cruel to someone with a very one-dimensional view of how to love the brethren. We do not do so by simply being friendly and superficially kind to one another. Our love is deep enough to withhold the fellowship it desires for the good of the one we love.

So separation from a sinning believer has a number of good and healthy effects on the local church. Firstly, it will restore the true believer. When this kind of separation is exercised in the right way, it will have its intended effect. A believer will hurt; he will begin to shiver in the cold of Satan's domain, and will repentantly seek fellowship again. The hardness of life apart from Christian love will break a backslidden heart's rebellion. I believe we see this effect in 2 Corinthians:

"Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure--not to put it too severely--to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him." (2Co 2:5-8)

This may well be the same individual that Paul called for the church to discipline in 1 Corinthians. If so, then he had repented, and Paul now called on the church to welcome him back with open arms, and not allow the devil to sow seeds of bitterness.

When churches are healthy and godly, then church discipline will have the effect that God intended for it to have. It will restore sinning believers.

Secondly, it will reveal false believers. When church discipline is done in the right way for the right reasons, someone who still refuses to repent is more than likely evidencing the fact that they were never born again. Hardness of heart is supposed to be broken by church discipline. If removal from the saints' fellowship hardly matters to the individual concerned, it is questionable if they were ever truly saved. This is why separation treats the person as if they were not saved. Quite simply, that may well be the case. Our approach may in fact be to confront the person with the expectations of a Christian – such as the expectations in the book of I John. If the person has no desire to live up to the Bible's standard for a Christian, we are fully within our Biblical rights to tell them their salvation is dubious. True believers care about righteousness and pleasing the Lord and walking in fellowship with Him and His children. So, what this form of separation does is reveal those who were never truly saved. It effectively purifies the church from the goats in sheep's clothing, the tares from the wheat. It is not that we must go around weeding, but we are called to hold each other up to a high standard of accountability. This high standard will be impossible for an unbeliever lacking the Holy Spirit, moreover, they will not care when we call on them to repent.

Thirdly, this kind of separation preserves the reputation of God in the local church. How sad to have unbelievers point out the immorality, the perversions, the dishonesty tolerated in so many churches. How sad that so many couples live together apart from marriage and then happily attend church and their churches are happy with it as well. All this brings reproach and dishonour to the name of Christ in the church. When the church holds a high standard and purifies itself from unrepentant professing believers, at least the world will know we are consistent to practice what we preach.

Fourthly, this kind of separation prevents sinfulness from spreading. This is what Paul meant when he told the Corinthians: He goes on to say:

“Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” (1Co 5:6-8)

Here Paul is alluding to the Jewish festivals of Passover and Unleavened bread. On Nisan 14, the day the Passover lamb would be sacrificed, Jewish households would conduct a meticulous search for leaven, or yeast. Yeast represented evil influence or sin. Only unleavened bread was eaten during this time. So Paul, comparing the local church to a Jewish household, says sweep out the corrupting influences in your midst. Sin is like yeast – of which a small amount is necessary to cause a whole lump of dough to rise. A small amount of tolerated sin in the body will infect the whole lump. Sin is to be stamped out, not politely endured.

Separation from unrepentant professing believers is a necessary tool to help those who have fallen into sin and its accompanying hardness of heart - self-deception and

blindness. It is a sometimes a severe act of rescue for someone slipping into self-destruction.

Biblical Separation. It is a wonderful thing. It is the actualisation of the holiness of God upon this earth. God is separate from sin. He is holy. He is separate from Satan's philosophy of worldliness which denies God's glory. God is separate from unbelievers till they repent and trust Christ as Saviour. God is separate from false teaching and teachers who pervert His precious truth. God is also separate from false believers, and the unrepentant believer will find God's fellowship to be not what it used to be. So a believer can do nothing less that separate from these things, since we carry the very name of God ourselves.

Likewise these things infect, spread and hurt God's people. Sin, worldliness, compromise, false doctrine and ungodly practices, when tolerated, are not static. They envelop and permeate the church and the lives of other saints. Separation is the preventative action. And finally, separation is wonderfully positive. There is a cleaving to Christlikeness, to the local church, to other believers, to God's Word, to Christ Himself. The lord is especially close to those who turn from what is unfriendly to God to embrace only those things God loves. The soul that loves what God loves and hates what He hates will find himself particularly blessed with the knowledge and fellowship of God.

It is about time the church stopped making pragmatic excuses for sin, stopped putting peacemaking ahead of purity, stopped seeking to impress the world instead of improving the world with the Gospel and holy lives, stopped compromising and started consecrating. Let's return to wholehearted, God-centred, loving Biblical separation.
